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## Perspectives

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### The "American Dream" in Black and White Populations: A Perceptions Versus Reality Analysis

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## The "American Dream" in Black and White Populations: A Perceptions Versus Reality Analysis

**Emma Watts**

### ABSTRACT

*Do White and Black Americans equally believe in the American Dream? Does the American Dream offer hope for Black Americans to hold on to, or has racial oppression made the dream feel out of reach? Since such ideas, like the promise of social mobility offered by freedom, motivate and inform economic, social, and political beliefs, understanding how such narratives function is of critical need. In this study, I used the 2012 Outlook on Life Survey (N=2,294) to analyze the differences in attitudes about the American Dream between Black and White populations in the United States. I analyzed data about how far along the American Dream participants will progress, how hard it will be for them to have a financially secure retirement, and how hard it will be for them to do better than their parents. I hypothesized that Black participants would be more pessimistic about the American Dream and would view that it is harder for them to do better than their parents based on previous studies about institutional, cultural, and internalized racism. My findings did not support my hypotheses. I found no significant differences in Black and White attitudes about American Dream progression and found that Black participants were more likely to report that it would be easier for them to do better than their parents and to have a financially secure retirement. My findings suggest that Americans generally feel similarly about the American Dream, despite racial differences.*

## INTRODUCTION

The United States of America was founded upon three key principles listed in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Many connect these ideas to the abstract goal of the “American Dream”. Achievement of such an abstract goal is largely influenced by people’s perceptions of society and is based on various metrics of economic and social prosperity (Hanson and White 2010). Researchers have found that 36 percent of people believe that they have already achieved the American Dream and 46 percent of people believe that they will be able to achieve it within their lifetime (Smith 2017).

According to several studies, there are large disparities between Black and White Americans. There is a gap in educational attainment between African Americans and Whites, Black populations have larger infant mortality rates, Black workers make on average 82.5 cents for every dollar that White workers make, and the incarceration rate for Black people is six times that for Whites (Gooden and Meyers 2018). Black households hold on average approximately 17,000 dollars in wealth while White households hold on average approximately 171,000 dollars in wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 2019). These studies support the reality that Black people in the United states live with structural inequalities that make it harder for them to believe in the American Dream.

I will be investigating public perception data from the 2012 Outlook on Life Survey to determine if there are differences in attitudes about the American Dream between Black and White populations. The specific variables that I will be focusing on are the components found by a variety of researchers to be most influential to the American Dream. I will look at questions regarding beliefs about the attainability of the American Dream to assess how White and Black people feel about the abstract language of the American Dream. I will also look at perceptions

about attainability of specific goals such as retirement as that has been shown to be an indicator of perceived achievement of the American Dream. Lastly, I will look at the two groups' attitudes about their likelihood of social mobility by looking at perceptions of their experience versus the experiences of previous generations. All of these questions will help to get a comprehensive view of the beliefs of Black and White populations on both the specific aspects of the American Dream and the abstract ideology of the term.

## BACKGROUND

### *Defining the American Dream*

The American Dream was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achieve" (Adams 1931: 317). In this section, I will look at sociological research and perspectives attempting to analyze and operationalize the terminology used by Adams in 1931. I will use the levels of racism framework (Jones 2000) to create a comprehensive view of how institutional, personally mediated, and internalized racism impact the lives of Black people in the United States of America. Through these studies and frameworks, we will see that the experiences of Black people are different from those of White people. Racism impedes the achievement of the American Dream suggesting that Black Americans will be less likely to believe in such ideology.

Researchers have long debated the definition of the American Dream. The term includes many conflicting goals and meanings that intertwine to form a vast web of cultural ideology (Hauhart 2015). While some claim that the American Dream has been reduced to the attainment of financial prosperity (Messner and Rosenfeld 2007), others claim that it contains non-economic goals of personal fulfillment and perseverance through adversity (Hanson and White 2010). The

Pew Research Center determined that people describe the American Dream as: freedom in making life decisions, having a family, and being able to retire comfortably (Smith 2017). Other research has shown that those who have self-reported as having already achieved the American Dream were those with more wealth than the generations before them, those with higher educations, and those who described their careers as successful (Armstrong, Chavez, Jones, Harris, and Harris 2019).

Most sociologists agree that the American Dream is an ideology that promotes the pursuit of social and material success (Kwate and Meyer 2010). Americans are becoming more pessimistic about their ability to attain the American Dream; however, the persistence of the ideology points to its cultural significance as the pursuit of a goal rather than a lived-reality (Cohen-Marks and Stout 2011). The pursuit of the American Dream is predicated on the false premise that hard work guarantees success (Cohen-Marks and Stout 2011).

#### *How Racism Impacts the American Dream*

The subtle process called mental colonization (Osajima 1993) is materialized through abstract and seemingly non-racial ideology such as meritocracy (Park 2005). Abstract liberalism is the justification of the disparities between Black and White populations in non-racial terms that emphasize individualism and equality. These appeals to abstract liberalism are superficially rational and blame the oppressed for the disparities that they may face (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The meritocratic principle that opportunities are equally available to everyone in society and that success is awarded based on hard work ignores the structural obstacles that many Americans, particularly People of Color, have to work against (Kwate and Meyer 2010). Racial disparities demonstrate the fallacy of equality in the ideology of the American Dream.

Race is not biologically based (Schwartz, 2001); rather, it has been socially constructed throughout history to privilege certain groups and subjugate others, the consequences of which remain today (Smedley, 2007). In 2016, the rate of poverty for Black people was double that of White people, the median annual income for Black people was 20% lower than that of their White counterparts, and the median White household net worth was over 13 times higher than Black households (Maloney 2016). Structural inequalities residual from slavery, such as unemployment, mass incarceration, and the education gap lead to self-reported failure to achieve the American Dream in African Americans (Cernkovich, Gordano, and Rudolph 2000).

The historical legacy of the social construction of race affects the social lives of People of Color today as well. Clifford Broman (1997) describes the Black experience in the Western world as: "to face daily: the stress of racism and to be a potential victim of discriminatory treatment" (Broman 1997: 47). Chronic discrimination, defined as unequal treatment on the basis of race, is a reality that the majority of African Americans report experiencing (Mouzon, Taylor, Woodward and Chatters 2017). Discriminatory behavior and attitudes, or personally mediated racism, are formed by the cultural or internalized racism that shapes societal beliefs and norms (Bowser 2017; Jones 2000; Ruggs, Martinez, and Hebl 2011) and are used as a tool to exclude Black Americans from the achievement of the American Dream (Dollar 2014).

Internalized racism occurs when the dominant group infiltrates the ideologies of the marginalized culture (Pyke 2010; Gramsci 1971). This occurs through cultural myths, stereotyping, and intra-group discrimination, all which serve to make the interests of the oppressors seem beneficial to everyone (Pyke 2010). This subtle force of White domination causes People of Color in the United States to accept their material reality as it is and reduce

opposition to the status quo (Pyke 1996). Internalization of the logic of the oppressor justifies African American exclusion from the social mobility promised by the American Dream.

The oppressed reinforce these myths and ideologies through intra-group othering. After initial stereotypes about an ethnic group are introduced into a society's collective consciousness, everyone in that ethnic group faces being perceived through the lens of those stereotypes (Gilman 1986). In order for an individual to gain social access to the dominant group, they must first prove shared attitudes and contempt for their own ethnic group. This act of self-detachment from those who fit the stereotypes acts to further cement the stereotype into society, creating a double-bind (Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Shrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir 2000). The oppressed are not to blame for intra-group othering; however, the oppressive society is culpable for requiring the marginalized to turn on each other in order for the possibility of mobility and success (Schwalbe et al., 2000). This process results in the traumatization of the marginalized communities excluded from the American Dream, who internalize the belief that they should not be able to succeed.

The purpose of my study is to investigate the differences in perceptions of the American Dream between Black and White Americans. Previous studies have shown that exposure to institutional racism through economic disparities, personally mediated racism through discrimination, and internalized racism through mental colonization and intra-group othering, is correlated with poor quality of life, poor health outcomes, lower mental health, and decreased self-esteem (Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, Concelli 2000). This supports why many Black Americans are less likely to report having already achieved the American Dream (Cohen-Marks and Stout 2011). I will be investigating perceptions about attainability of the American Dream, retirement, and generational mobility. Informed by the findings of previous research, I predict



that Black people will overall be more pessimistic about achieving the American Dream than White people.

Hypothesis 1: Black participants will self-report as not being able to make it as far along the American Dream compared to White participants.

Hypothesis 2: Black participants will believe that it is harder to progress further than their parents than White participants.

Hypothesis 3: Black participants will believe that it is harder to achieve a financially secure retirement than White participants.

## METHODS

### *Data*

This study will be utilizing previously collected data from the Outlook on Life Survey (OLS). The primary objective of the OLS was to collect data about the political and social attitudes within the United States of America. The OLS attempted to collect data addressing the ways that cultural attitudes, political affiliation and leaning, sexual orientation and behavior, marital status, religious importance and involvement, social class, and ethnicity impact opinion and behavior. Data was collected from August 2012 until December 2012 using a web-based survey. Participants were randomly selected using probability-based sampling from the GfK Knowledge Network which is designed to be a representative sampling frame of the United States population. There were 2,294 participants in this study, and it included a large oversample of Black respondents. In terms of answering my question, this oversample helps accurately depict attitudes in White versus Black communities. The target population was Americans over the age of 18 who are not institutionalized and have access to a computer. This study was completed in two waves where 1,601 participants from wave one were reinterviewed. For the

purpose of my analysis, I will only be using data from wave one because the sample size is larger and several of the survey questions relevant to my hypotheses were omitted in the second wave.

### *Measures*

To assess the perceptions about the American Dream explicitly, and answer H1, I will use the question, “How far along the road to your American Dream do you think you will ultimately get?” Participants picked one number on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 indicating “not far at all” and 10 indicating “nearly there”. I recoded the responses to this question to exclude refused responses.

To assess indirect but related concepts of the American Dream, and to answer H2, I use the question, “For yourself and people like you, how easy or hard is it to have a financially secure retirement?” The possible answers were “very hard, somewhat hard, somewhat easy, and very easy”, with “very hard” coded as 1 and “very easy” coded as 4. Afterwards, I group “very hard” and “somewhat hard” together to form a category of “difficult” and “very easy” and “somewhat easy” together to form a category of “easy”. I recoded the responses to this question to exclude refused responses.

Lastly, the survey asked, “For yourself and people like you, how easy or hard is it to do better than one’s parents did?” which I used to assess H3. The possible answers were “very hard, somewhat hard, somewhat easy, and very easy”. “Very hard” was coded as 1 and “very easy” was coded as 4. Once again, I group “very hard” and “somewhat hard” together to form a category of “difficult” and “very easy” and “somewhat easy” together to form a category of “easy”. I recoded the responses to this question to exclude refused responses.

The OLS asked respondents what their race or ethnicity is from the options of: "White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, or 2+ races, Non-Hispanic". For the purposes of this analysis, I only analyzed the respondents who self-selected as "White non-Hispanic" and "Black non-Hispanic" and I excluded individuals who self-selected as multiracial or multiple categories. I coded a new variable of White versus Black that omits all refused responses and all responses that are not within the two variables.

To control for other demographic interferences, I included the variables of age, sex, income, educational achievement, employment status, marital status, region of the U.S. that the respondent resides in, and whether the household has access to the internet in my analysis. Participants were asked their age and it was both recorded as raw data and put into 5 categorical brackets. Sex was reported as either male or female. It was coded as 1 as "male" and 2 as "female." Income was measured looking at yearly household income with 19 income brackets. Educational achievement was measured using both a highest grade completed, or degree received question and a four-attribute categorical question. For the purposes of my analysis, I only included the later which use the categories less than high school, high school degree, some college, and bachelor's degree or higher

### *Analytic Strategy*

In order to test my hypotheses, I first conducted univariate analyses of my data, specifying my sample characteristics and providing means where appropriate and percentages when the data is ordinal or nominal. Then, I conducted ordinary least squares regression analyses to test H1 and ordinal logistic regression for H2 and H3, represented respectively as Model 1, Model 2, and Model 3. Regression types were chosen based on the appropriate assumptions. All models include the sociodemographic controls of gender, access to internet, marital status,

employment status, educational achievement, region, and income. All analyses were conducted in STATA 14.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the demographic data for my sample. 55% of my sample is comprised of women. The average age of the respondents is about 49 years old and their age ranged from 18 to 81. Educational achievement was well distributed between high school, some college, and bachelor's degree or higher with 31%, 30%, and 30% respectively. 9% of my sample have never completed high school. The median income for this sample was within the bracket of \$30,000-39,999 and that bracket holds just over 10% of the sample. The lowest bracket of less than \$5,000 contained under 6% of the sample and the highest bracket of \$175,000 or higher contained under 4% of the sample.

Table 1. Summary Statistics Means, Observations, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Control Variables

Variable	N	Average/ Percentage	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Sex	2,294				
Male		44.99%		0	1
Female		55.01%		0	1
Age	2,294	48.90	16.46	18	81
Education	2,294				
Less than high school		9.55%		0	1
High school		30.51%		0	1
Some college		29.73%		0	1
College degree or more		30.21%		0	1
Income	2,294				
Less than \$5,000		5.54%		0	1
\$5,000 to \$9,999		5.45%		0	1
\$10,000 to \$19,999		9.93%		0	1
\$20,000 to \$29,999		10.85%		0	1
\$30,000 to \$39,999		10.46%		0	1
\$40,000 to \$49,000		7.06%		0	1
\$50,000 to \$59,000		7.89%		0	1
\$60,000 to \$74,999		10.24%		0	1
\$75,000 to \$99,999		11.94%		0	1
\$100,000 to \$124,999		8.72%		0	1
\$125,000 to \$149,999		5.45%		0	1
\$150,000 to \$174,999		2.75%		0	1
\$175,000 or more		3.71%		0	1

Univariate analyses of the dependent variables, displayed in Table 2, yielded interesting results. In response to the question for H1 about the American Dream, the average response is a 6.4 on a ten-point scale. This means that the majority of respondents believe that they will get most of the way toward the American Dream, but not achieve it fully. The responses ranged from “not far at all” to being “nearly there”. This is in line with what I expected because the majority of the respondents are in the middle of the attitudes and not leaning toward one extreme or the other. In response to the question for H2 about retirement, 45% of people responded, “somewhat hard”. In general, approximately 78% of the respondents reported that it would be hard for them to save for retirement. This was not what I expected because the Pew Research Center data showed that the majority of people (82 percent) believe in the American Dream and the majority of people (96 percent) claim that retirement is either essential or important to achieving the American Dream (Smith 2017). In response to the question for H3 about generational mobility, 39% of participants answered that it is somewhat hard for them, or people like them, to do better than their parents. Generally, 52% of people believe that it is difficult to do better than their parents and 48% of people believe that it is easy. This is also not what I expected because it does not align with the overwhelming belief in the American Dream shown by the Pew Research Center.

Table 2. Summary Statistics including Means, Observations, Standard Deviations, and Ranges of Independent and Dependent Variables

Variable	N	Average/ Percentage	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Race	2,092				
White		38.91%		0	1
Black		61.09%		0	1
American Dream Progression	2,235	6.403	2.19	1	10
Retirement Attainability	2,227				
Very hard		32.91%		0	1
Somewhat hard		45.44%		0	1
Somewhat easy		17.51%		0	1
Very easy		4.13%		0	1
Generational Mobility	2,230				
Very hard		13.00%		0	1
Somewhat hard		38.97%		0	1
Somewhat easy		35.92%		0	1
Very easy		12.11%		0	1

Table 3 shows the results of the models I ran to test how my dependent variables vary by race. Hypothesis 1 stated that Black participants would self-report as not being able to make it as far along the American Dream when compared to White participants. Model 1 suggests that there are no significant differences between White and Black respondents' perceptions of how far along the American Dream they will be able to get. The significant controls for this model are for income, current employment status, household access to internet and having a college education. Those who live in households with access to the internet ( $\beta = 0.08$   $p < 0.001$ ) and those who are employed ( $\beta = 0.05$   $p < 0.05$ ) are significantly more likely to believe that they can progress further on the American Dream. People who make more money are significantly more likely to believe

that they can progress further on the American Dream ( $\beta = 0.18$   $p < 0.001$ ) as are those who are college educated ( $\beta = 0.23$   $p < 0.001$ ). For this hypothesis, I fail to reject the Null Hypothesis.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analyses (Standard Errors) on the American Dream (Model 1), Retiring Securely (Model 2), and Doing Better than one's Parents (Model3)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Black, Non-Hispanic	-0.0082 (0.11)	0.13** (0.09)	0.27*** (0.09)
Age	0.043 (0.00)	0.11* (0.00)	0.20*** (0.00)
Education (Less than high school)			
High school	0.020 (0.20)	-0.027 (0.16)	0.070 (0.16)
Some college	0.10** (0.20)	0.14 (0.17)	0.14 (0.17)
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.23*** (0.22)	0.19* (0.18)	0.13 (0.18)
Female	-0.014 (0.10)	-0.014 (0.08)	0.057 (0.08)
Household Income	0.18*** (0.01)	0.35*** (0.01)	0.18*** (0.01)
Region (Northeast)			
Midwest	0.022 (0.16)	-0.025 (0.13)	-0.056 (0.13)



South	0.061*	0.059	0.054
	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.11)
West	0.050	0.0097	-0.043
	(0.18)	(0.14)	(0.14)
HH Internet Access	0.081***	0.031	0.100*
	(0.13)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Current Employment Status	0.045*	0.17***	0.024
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Household Size	0.025	-0.052	0.016
	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Observations	2092	2092	2092

Standardized beta coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05    \*\* p<0.01    \*\*\* p<0.001

Hypothesis 2 stated that Black participants would believe that it is harder to achieve a financially secure retirement than White participants. Model 2 suggests that Black people are significantly more likely to believe that it is *easier* to achieve a financially secure retirement than White participants ( $\beta=0.13$  p<0.01). Age, education, employment status and income also impact an individual's perceptions of achievability of retirement. People who are older are significantly more likely to have confidence in easily having retirement ( $\beta=0.11$  p<0.05). Individuals who make more money are also significantly more likely to believe that it is easier to achieve a financially secure retirement ( $\beta=0.35$  p<0.001). Finally, those who are college educated ( $\beta=0.19$  p<0.05) and those who are employed ( $\beta=0.17$  p<0.001) are significantly more likely to believe

that it is easier to achieve a financially secure retirement. For this hypothesis, I reject the Null Hypothesis but not in the expected direction of association.

Hypothesis 3 stated that Black participants would believe that it is harder to progress further than their parents than White participants. Model 3 suggests that Black participants are significantly more likely to believe that it is *easier* to progress further than their parents than White participants ( $\beta = 0.27$   $p < 0.001$ ). Age, household access to internet and income also impact an individual's perceptions of generational mobility. People who are older are significantly more likely to believe that they will do better than their parents did ( $\beta = 0.20$   $p < 0.001$ ). Individuals who make more money are also significantly more likely to believe that they will do better than their parents did ( $\beta = 0.18$   $p < 0.001$ ). Lastly, participants with households that have access to the internet are significantly more likely to believe that they will do better than their parents did ( $\beta = 0.10$   $p < 0.05$ ). For this hypothesis, I also fail to reject the Null Hypothesis.

## DISCUSSION

Are there differences in attitudes about the American Dream between Black and White populations? The research suggests that there are differences in attitudes regarding some aspects of the American Dream between races; however, it is not that Black Americans feel that they do not have access to the American Dream like internalized racism theory suggests. Contrary to my hypotheses, Black people are more likely to think that it is easier to both save for retirement and do better than their parents than White people despite recent studies showing the lack of intergenerational mobility, especially for People of Color (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, and Porter 2018). These findings have major implications in support of other prevalent theories such as systemic racism theory (2013), Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) and the works of Karl Marx.

Marx claims that ideology stems from the bourgeoisie because consciousness is derived from everyday experiences which are controlled by the ruling class. The class that controls the material reality within a society is also the class that controls thoughts and desires (Dillon 2020). Marx mainly discusses this in regard to the ideology of consumption, but I think that it is also relevant in explaining why Black people perceive that they have more opportunity than they actually do under the current system.

In systemic racism theory, Feagin claims that racist systems' core driving factor is creating and maintaining White economic domination through systemic racism and racist ideology (Feagin and Elias 2013). The goal of White economic domination is threatened if the people who are oppressed are aware of their oppression, as demonstrated by Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 (Smedley 2007). In order to support this goal, ideology is necessary to provide people with a false consciousness (Dillon, 2020). Ideology is created and maintained by the wealthiest people in the United States who own the top media companies (Archer and Clinton 2018), social media, transnational corporations and can pay politicians to keep certain topics off of the political discourse (Vogel 2014; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016). The American Dream and the reinforcement of rags to riches stories in the media provide the necessary hope for individuals that their current conditions are temporary and that they need not uprise. This could explain why there is a large knowledge gap between perceptions of the American Dream and the trend of downward mobility for Black people.

The implications of recognizing that people are either unaware of the reality of downward mobility, or that they believe they are an outlier to the trend, support the necessary educational work that is called for in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his book, Freire claims that the current educational model is failing to produce critical thinkers because it

is relying too much on narratives of what we should know and telling students what reality is, a concept he calls “the banking concept of education” (Freire and Ramos 1970:76). He calls for a dialogical approach based on lived experience and investigation as a tool for cultural action and liberation. These tactics should be implemented in educational systems to lessen the knowledge gap between perceptions and realities and create a thinking generation willing to question racist systems that oppress and limit the people of a society (Freire and Ramos 1970).

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations to this study. First, the survey was not administered longitudinally which prevents us from being able to make claims about the evolution of the American Dream and its significance throughout the course of a person's life. Future studies should study their sample throughout as much time as possible to assess how the ideology of the American Dream changes over time. Additionally, the survey methods that this study used may not have been comprehensive enough to dig into the complexities of such an abstract concept. An area for future research could be in depth interviews and other qualitative measures to understand an individual's understanding of the American Dream. Lastly, the previous research on perceptions of the American Dream and race are still fairly limited. This study helped to establish the relationship between the American Dream and the Black and White experience but there are many other racial and ethnic groups in the United States that are yet to be studied in relation to the American Dream.

### *Conclusion*

Ideologies are an important aspect of life that impact what we think, how we interpret society, and how we act. This research demonstrates why ideologies are crucial for sociologists to study. In the case of the American Dream, the ideology is so powerful in the lives of Black

populations that it supersedes everyday reality, allowing them to believe that they can achieve the American Dream despite the disparities and structural impediments to success. Ideologies can also point to the existence of power dynamics in society that are pushing a certain narrative to maintain existing circumstances. In order to create a more equal society, it is important to recognize all of the forces at work to maintain structural oppression. It is only then that we can deconstruct those structures and address disparities head on.

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